



Jan. 6, 2004

## Decorated McChord crew recounts enemy attack

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**McCHORD AIR FORCE BASE, Wash. (AMCNS)** - Teamwork, training and the durability of the C-17 Globemaster III are what got a McChord aircraft safely on the ground after it was attacked by hostile forces over Baghdad International Airport, according to the aircrew.

The five crew members recently recounted what happened during the 10-minutes from when their No. 2 engine exploded shortly after take-off Dec. 9, to when they safely landed the C-17 back at Baghdad IAP.

While an Air Mobility Command investigation team determined that hostile action caused the catastrophic explosion and continues to investigate to determine what exactly struck the aircraft, the mission's aircraft commander that day said he knew right away they were hit by something.

"The impact just shuddered the plane," said Capt. Paul Sonstein, a pilot in the 62nd Airlift Wing here. "I thought we were hit by something. I didn't know what, but I knew something got us."

The crew immediately started their checklist, shutting down the engine and planning their return to the airport. With Captain Sonstein flying the plane, 1st Lt. Andrew Oiland, the co-pilot that day also from the 62nd AW, ran the checklist and worked the radio. Behind him sat another 62nd AW pilot, Capt. Anne Lueck, who watched over the cockpit to ensure nothing was missed.

Tech. Sgt. Jim Alexander, a Reserve loadmaster with the 446th AW here, sat in the jumpseat behind the aircraft commander and had the best view of the engine.

"We had a very large flame coming out of the top of the engine," Sergeant Alexander said. "It looked like a flamethrower sticking out of the top."

With Sergeant Alexander scanning the engine and monitoring the fire, the C-17's other on-board loadmaster and fellow 446th Reservist, Staff Sgt. Eric Olson, was downstairs taking care of the passengers and coordinated everyone's escape once they landed.

Everyone doing their assigned job and working together as a team helped get the aircraft safely on the ground, according to Captain Lueck.

"The crew resource management training that we (all received) proved to be invaluable," she said. "I think that's what saved all of our lives and the lives of our passengers - how well we coordinated (and) how well we communicated with each other."

The fact that many of the C-17's systems are backed-up through redundancy also proved invaluable, as did the aircrew's simulator training, in which pilots regularly practice landing with an engine out, Captain Sonstein said.

"It felt and handled no different than a four-engine approach," he said, referring to how the aircraft flew as he circled back to the airport. "It was nothing different because I was so used to the simulator."

Captain Sonstein had to land the C-17 with only his standby instruments. Despite being the first time to ever land the aircraft without the benefit of the Heads-Up Display, he did so safely.

All five crew members' performance that day earned them Air Medals, which were presented by Vice President Dick Cheney during a visit to McChord on Dec. 22.

"It was an honor to be there and to shake his hand, and get (the Air Medal) pinned on by the Vice President," Captain Sonstein said.

Despite the accolades, the crew knows there are still many servicemembers overseas fighting the war on terrorism in similarly dangerous situations, Lieutenant Oiland said.

"We have people from all four services putting up with some pretty tough conditions over there, doing some pretty amazing things every day," he said.

Still, Sergeant Alexander said he was incredibly impressed with the response of his fellow aircrew members, who saved their passenger's lives, their cargo, a multi-million dollar airplane and, not the least of which, their own lives.

"I've been flying for 14 years, and I don't think anybody could have handled the situation any better than these guys did," Sergeant Alexander said. "They did a great job."

